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ABSTRACT

Recommendations for starting a process of collaboration between public schools and social service agencies are offered in this digest. The first step, information gathering, is discussed, as well as strategies for carrying out other stages in the process--selecting, approaching, and meeting with participants; problem solving; and maintaining the relationship. A conclusion is that joint ventures between schools and agencies increases accessibility to services and facilitates interagency communication. (8 references) (LMI)

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Building Relationships Between Schools and Social Services

by Lynn Balster Liontos

Public schools and social service agencies often serve the same clients and have the same goals. Both also have too few resources to adequately respond to the myriad problems facing children and families today. If schools don't collaborate with social service agencies, schools will end up assuming responsibility for problems that go well beyond their educational scope. It is, therefore, in the interest of schools to take the lead in establishing a collaborative process with social service agencies.

This Digest contains recommendations addressed to administrators, school board members, teachers, and support staff who want to start a collaborative process in their community. It is up to administrators of participating schools and agencies to provide time for staff members to work on joint ventures.

What Is the First Step in Beginning a Collaborative Process?

Find out about agencies in your community. The National Collaboration for Youth (1990), in highlighting lessons learned from over 350 Town Summit Meetings across the country, said that respondents consistently reported how little they knew about what was going on in their own communities. Many were surprised to discover other groups and organizations that were concerned about or working on the same problems.

Anything you can do to familiarize yourself with agencies in your community will help in establishing relationships that can eventually lead to collaboration. For example, learn how your potential partners operate: who is in charge, officially and unofficially? What are their needs, pressures, and perceived roles? Their limitations and requirements? Ride around with a caseworker to experience a typical day in this field, then invite that person to your classroom or school to observe *your* day. Remember that connections aren't with agencies—they are with people.

How Are Participants Selected, and How Should They Be Approached?

Most experts suggest meeting one-on-one, initially, with individuals from different agencies. How do you select the players? Make a list of agencies that you can envision interacting with your school, then invite one person from each agency to coffee. Some schools select people for public spiritedness or the ability to "give and take." Others choose heads of agencies since it is useful to work with a person who has decision-making authority.

Communicate positively. You might say, "What would you think if we did this?" or "We want to do a better job, be a better partner to you." Ask questions to be sure you understand the other person's point of view (thereby making it more likely they'll want to hear *your* view). Ask agency people if they have anything they would like to tell your personnel—and assure them you are willing to hear criticism.

Most importantly, remember that relationships must be reciprocal. Find out what would make working together a win-win situation for both of you. You might ask, "What is it that you need out of this?"

What Tips Are There for Meeting with the Whole Team?

After getting together individually, call a meeting of all interested participants. Choose a comfortable setting and talk about what each agency and individual has to offer to your central goal or vision. Then ask, "Is this an idea we want to pursue?" If so, work on creating common beliefs and goals.

A collaborative venture involves being committed to a common agenda. Melaville (1991) suggests developing a broad shared vision and a practical one that outlines major goals and objectives and links vision with reality. You might begin by asking, "How can we improve what we're already doing?" Consider presenting objectives from each partner's point of view, then look for areas of agreement and be open to compromise.

Here are some other tips to consider:

- Develop good collaborative qualities: Respect the procedures and conventions of the other participants.
- Be flexible. Each of you will probably have to give a little in exchange for the benefits of collaboration.
- Be willing to take risks and make mistakes; see problems as challenges.
- Go into a collaborative venture with a positive attitude.
- Agree to disagree. Disagreement is natural, though you do have to be motivated, dedicated, and committed to each other and your common vision.
- Enter the process with the desire to change the status quo—that is, to alter the way you have worked in the past with children and families.

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• Be persistent; stumbling blocks can be overcome.

What If There Are Conflicts or Resistance?

Every collaborative effort will run into problems at some time. Here are five ways to deal with them:

1. *Get top-level commitment.* Commitment from key officials for collaborative efforts provides inspiration, incentive, and the assurance of organizational backing.

2. *Involve teachers and staff in planning from the earliest possible moment.* Let them voice their fears and concerns, and let them know they are heard. If possible, provide training for all staff and administrators.

3. *Meet problems head on.* "Interagency initiatives that circumvent issues about how, where, why, and by whom services should be allocated, in an effort to avoid turf issues and other conflicts, are likely to result in innocuous objectives that do little to improve the status quo," states Melaville. Try to resolve problems at the lowest possible level first. Or, bring in a neutral party.

4. *Understand that, over time, resistance will work to your benefit.* Cory Dunn, coordinator of student support services at Linn-Benton Education Service District in Albany, Oregon, says that it takes time for people to feel at ease, speak up about what they are experiencing, and get disagreements and misperceptions worked out.

5. *Find ways to share information.* Sharing information is something every collaborative effort will have to face at one time or another. First, identify what barriers exist and whether they result from policy differences, differences in terminology, inhouse rules that can be changed, or statutory mandates. Then take time to air disagreements and discover areas of commonality and design a release form that details the exchange of specific kinds of information. Use state guidance when necessary; the state can help remove barriers to coordinated delivery of services (*Turning Points* 1991).

How Do We Sustain Our Relationship?

Go slowly—lay a firm foundation. "Beginning initiatives are often impatient to make immediate headway,'" says Melaville, "but building a strong foundation takes time and considerable patience." It often takes one to five years to get collaborative projects off the ground (Liontos 1991). In a project in Maryland, school participants had serious concerns about increased workload and other issues (Melaville). The organizers assured them that planning would not proceed if the district had doubts or felt pressured to participate. With this kind of communication, the group was able to resolve key issues during additional meetings and formed a planning committee "only when common ground was firmly under foot."

Pay attention to ownership issues. Whether your venture starts from the top down or bottom up, be sure that your process is an inclusive one. The commitment to change must extend throughout the organizational structure of each participating agency. Be sure that all participants have a part to play in achieving common goals.

Clearly assign opportunities to plan and implement action to different individuals and agencies, then hold them responsible for the completion of the activities.

Create a vehicle for heads of agencies to meet. Dunn states that having the heads of agencies meet on a quarterly basis as a board of advisors for the ESD's Youth Service Teams ensures that the agencies maintain an interest and investment in the teams. This also reinforces the collaborative effort for staff.

Move through developmental stages. Dunn believes that, in voluntary collaboration, you need to go through a three-tiered approach, with the first level being communication. Relationship building is developmental, he stresses. Just getting to know each other and establishing trust are important (Liontos).

The next stage is cooperation: start doing some activities or programs together. According to Kirst (1991), a simple difference between cooperation and collaboration is that in cooperative projects agencies maintain administrative and program autonomy, whereas in collaboration, agencies join together to make improvements that are no single agency's responsibility.

Collaboration offers not only greater access to services, but the opportunity to fundamentally alter the quality of those services.

Whether cooperative or collaborative, Liontos found that the impact of joint ventures between schools and social service agencies not only increased accessibility to services for children and families, but facilitated interagency communication and relationships.

RESOURCES

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